

DEBATING ‘THE REDISCOVERY OF LIBERALISM’ IN ZAMBIA: RESPONSES TO HARRI ENGLUND

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In Africa 83(4) (November 2013), Harri Englund discussed several recent books on Zambia published preceding the country’s fiftieth independence anniversary. His article explored the ways in which recent publications by Zambian and Zambianist authors have launched a fresh research agenda, and he focused in particular on the scholarly engagement with liberalism. Below, we publish responses from David M. Gordon, Bizeck Jube Phiri and Giacomo Macola, whose work was discussed in this article, and a comment by James Ferguson on more scholarly directions.

‘The Hour Has Come!’ was the slogan that brought Frederick Chiluba and his neoliberal government victory over Zambia’s long-time president, Kenneth Kaunda, in 1991. Less than a decade later Zambians riffed, ‘The Hour Is Sour.’ Zambians and Zambianist scholars alike have been ambivalent about the ‘rediscovery of liberalism’, the theme that organizes Englund’s review article. The latest generation of historians has not embraced a political programme, unlike their Marxist predecessors, or, perhaps to Englund’s disappointment, even cohered around a set of theoretical concerns. Liberalism might describe some common sensibilities, but it remains distrusted, associated with the corruption of Chiluba’s regime and the enforcement of free market policies by international agencies. Historiography, instead, reveals multifaceted forms of resistance to Kaunda and his administration alongside disillusionment with the neoliberalism that replaced it.

The heroics of opposition to Kaunda formed one angle of investigation, but so did the shortfalls of Chiluba’s government, whether in the form of IMF-inspired prophecies, or, in my case, Pentecostal prognostics. My book reviewed by Englund, *Invisible Agents*, shows how spiritual ideas inspired political opposition to secular regimes, including the colonial administration, Kaunda’s humanism, and potentially also liberalism. The intention was never to claim that spirits were the ‘mainstay’ of Zambian politics, as Englund asserts, but rather that they were one aspect of political discourse that inspired agency. Across a century-long history, spiritual ideas were a precarious basis for hegemony and domination but an effective form of resistance. Disappointment in and distrust of political rulers, I suggest, emerged out of this particular history of resistance.

The final chapter of the book, which details how Pentecostal-inspired political movements contributed to Kaunda’s downfall and provided a political ideology that engaged with the post-Kaunda regime, is most relevant to Englund’s focus. The neoliberal era in Zambia offered opportunities for some, along with the ending of older, sometimes more stable, livelihoods for many. Englund, like myself, thinks that such economic and religious processes need to be shown to be ‘mutually constituted’, without subsuming one within the other. The problem is

not one of theory, but of the practice of historical writing grounded in sources that emphasize voice. Statements about economic conditions reveal little about how people perceived new patterns of impoverishment and wealth, and how they engaged the ruling class around these issues.

Scholars attuned to economic inequality often prefer to portray opposition as a direct materialist critique of those who acquire power and wealth at the expense of others. But this register of dissent hardly captures the nuances of oppositional voices. In the 1980s, Zambians criticized wealthy politicians, but they also reflected on their government's failure to act against the forces that blocked opportunities and the realization of their desires, along with their government's repression of those who could help in achieving health and wealth. Their government, some Zambians argued, was supposed to moderate capriciousness and harness uncertainty to serendipity; in short, rather than adopting the socialist and egalitarian emphasis of Zambian humanism, they wanted a government that helped them achieve individual prosperity. I argue that Pentecostalism – and perhaps liberalism for some – addressed these frustrations.

Englund finds this focus on achieving prosperity more reflective of globe-trotting English-speaking pastors of the era (in fact, a diverse bunch of West Africans, South Africans, Americans and Europeans) than of Zambian Pentecostals. In addition, he thinks that there are 'spurious parallels between Pentecostalism's alleged emphasis on individual salvation and neo-liberal economics' (p. 684). But what might the politics of a more authentic African (or Zambian) Pentecostalism look like? Englund writes of the 'majority of its African adherents: impoverished rural and peri-urban populations and struggling middle classes' (p. 684). Even if the urban elite I allegedly describe (based on my interviews with them and fieldwork in their churches) is the minority, and even if they do parrot some ideas of globe-trotting preachers, this elite, at both the helm of religious organizations and the front line of state political influence, is important. These Pentecostal big men and big women, as I call them, with their vertical client networks, complicate class-based and even spatial differentiations. Global Pentecostalism gave voice to the frustrations of many Zambians, whether they were Pentecostals or not. The purchase of Pentecostal ideas in Zambian political and religious discourses represented the intersection of global and vernacular ideas, not unlike the situation with other movements, such as those relating to indigenous rights, class struggle or environmental justice, which adopt and innovate a global political vocabulary as a basis for local action. Scholars need to be wary of 'spurious analogies' (p. 685), as Englund repeats, but they also have to be aware of the way in which transnational ideologies take on local meanings, which is what my work on Pentecostalism explores.

Englund's review of Larmer, Macola and Phiri's scholarship notices their proclivity to write about opposition, but often from the perspective of leaders. There are, as Englund observes, 'anti-authoritarian sensibilities' (p. 673) that run through all our scholarship: a tendency to highlight, perhaps celebrate, resistance. In my case, *Invisible Agents* centres on one of the most denigrated and marginalized of Zambian communities, the Lumpa, who made spiritual issues a basis for a rebellion against Kaunda's post-independence government. However, the tendency of historians – committed (more or less) to reveal the history of resistance from below – to write about oppositional movements in terms of the history of their leaders betrays an interesting tension in this historiography, linked,

perhaps, to the nature of the movements themselves, which often mirrored hegemonic patron–client arrangements even as they opposed them. The point is less about spurious analogies, as Englund puts it, than about a problematic tendency to attribute substantially alternative modes of governance to opposition movements. Opposition to Kaunda, for example, did not imply a liberal politics.

In this regard, *Invisible Agents* concludes that spiritual ideas, emerging from global and local contexts, inspired agency but never became effective governing ideologies. Sometimes transnational ideologies were especially influential for local forms of political opposition, as in the case of Pentecostalism; elsewhere, as with the Lumpa, spiritual ideas arose predominantly out of local histories. For some Zambians, spiritual beliefs were an embarrassing remnant of tradition or of over-enthusiastic Pentecostals; for others, spirits defined the trajectory of their lives. These concerns did not always shape politics, but they did inform challenges to dominant forms of sovereignty across modern Zambian history. They have done so, my book suggests, because spiritual ideas trace one path in the conceptual history of Central African political agency.

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Reading Harri Englund's review article on the new historiography of Zambia and delving into his highly perceptive interrogation of the six books that were the focus of the article, I was humbled by his analysis of the issues I raised in my book (Phiri 2006). The Capricorn Africa Society, which is the subject of my book, was sidelined by Africanist scholars and even occasionally dismissed. At the same time, the architect of the Capricorn Africa Society, David Sterling, was a subject of enquiry by another author in a biographical piece by Richard Hughes (Youé 2004). But Hughes' work was described as 'antiquated, thin, and Eurocentric' (Youé 2004: 362). In Youé's study, the Capricorn Africa Society was seen as an organization that characteristically consisted of members of the 'generally upper-class Britons with established connections' (Youé 2004: 361). Liberalism, especially in the form propounded by the Capricorn Africa Society, was regarded suspiciously and frowned upon by scholars.

Over the years, liberalism as a subject of academic enquiry has attracted some attention, but not to the extent of linking it to the activities of the nationalist era. In 1995, Hugh Macmillan published a brief but informative article in the *Zambia Journal of History* in which he stated that:

After twenty-five years and over fifty graduates it seems an opportune moment to publish a list of the dissertations and to attempt a short history of the programme, a historiographical survey of the contents of the dissertations, and an informal survey of what the MA graduates are now doing. (Macmillan 1995: 53)

At the time of the article, a total of eight graduates from the programme in the Department of History at the University of Zambia had completed doctorates and had joined the department, where they were engaged in research and

publication. Eventually, the work invested in the master's degrees mentioned by Macmillan, and later the PhDs, led to a number of articles and books, including those by Ackson M. Kanduzi (1986), Samuel N. Chipungu (1988; 1992) and Bizeck J. Phiri (2006). Nonetheless, the number of publications appearing from the department is not as high as expected. Worse still, the *Zambia Journal of History*, which was developed in the department and launched in 1981, has not been doing well. After several years of non-publication, the last issue came out in 2008.

A close examination of the articles appearing in the *Zambia Journal of History* clearly demonstrates that liberalism was never the main focus of academic enquiry. The journal consistently explored the more fashionable subjects influenced by the underdevelopment school of thought. Consequently, the role of liberal politics and liberal ideology was discussed only to the extent that it was useful to acknowledge the transformation of postcolonial Zambia in the era of political and economic liberalization under the Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) after 1991.

The discussion by Englund opens with a positive acknowledgement of Zambia 'as a country that has attracted an unusual degree of scholarly attention' (p. 670). He runs through a survey of ground-breaking studies on Zambia since the founding of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute in 1937. What is of interest is that some of the publications that formed the opening section of Englund's review article were also the subject of a debate between James Ferguson (1994) and Hugh Macmillan (1993; 1996). This debate (which was not available to me at the time of writing my own book) illuminated the question of the historiography of transition in the Zambian Copperbelt. While the debate between them is on the question of whether or not liberalism played a critical role in the way in which scholars interpreted the history of that time, it is humbling to note that, albeit intermittently, liberalism has been a subject of discussion among scholars interested in Zambian history.

While it is true that the six books that Englund reviews have changed the 'landscape of disciplinary emphases in the scholarship on Zambia', the revisionist history they advocate is yet to be consolidated. Evidently, academic publishing by Zambian authors has not met expectations. It was in view of this that in 2001 a group of scholars interested in Zambian history and other aspects of research on Zambia established the Network for Historical Research in Zambia (NHRZ), currently chaired by myself. The NHRZ emerged from the demise of the Historical Association of Zambia and its publication, *History in Zambia*. It has organized several conferences with a view of bringing out publications on important aspects of Zambian history, and it has set up a 'publishing wing' within the Lembani Trust.

Since its inception, the Lembani Trust has published eight books, four of which were discussed in Englund's review article. It is important to point out that the NHRZ is an organization of academic scholars based not just in Zambia: it includes scholars interested in Zambian research based in the United States of America, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. Indeed, it has been a challenge to Zambian-based members of the trust that, of the several works published by the Lembani Trust, the majority of the authors are from outside Zambia. Zambian scholars do not feature at all prominently.

While liberal politics have taken centre stage in the twenty-first century, civil society organizations have also begun to attract attention in Zambian scholarship. One of the books reviewed by Englund contains at least three chapters on civil society organizations (Gewald *et al.* 2009). Such scholarship is yet to find a strong role in influencing the direction of liberalism in Zambian academic works. It is important to note, however, that:

In a certain way, political parties can be considered as political organizations of the civil society that aggregate the interests of a particular group (or several groups), articulate and represent them. Through participation in democratic elections, they are anxious to present these interests to the representative and formal institutions of politics. (Hofmeister and Grabow 2011: 61)

This was certainly true of the founding of the MMD in 1990, before it was officially registered as a political party. It is therefore not surprising that, since the party's creation and its ascent to power in 1991, Zambia has experienced a rapid growth of civil society organizations that seek to influence the governance process and political system within the country. While this trend has attracted some scholarly attention, this is still in its infancy as far as Zambian scholarship on the subject is concerned.

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The new historiography of Zambia comes of age with Harri Englund's perceptive and stimulating review article. In the hands of a distinguished anthropologist, this diverse and, in some respects, analytically undeveloped body of literature prompts a whole range of fresh questions about history, culture, politics and religion. So tempting is this opportunity to continue with the conversation that I see no reason to be drawn into sterile personal or disciplinary polemics. Instead, inspired by Englund's gentle jibe about 'neoliberal' Tonga-speakers (p. 676), I propose to supplement my book's understanding of the relationship between Harry Nkumbula's political agenda and his key constituents' civic thought. The purpose of these further reflections on the intersections between high and popular politics in southern Zambia is to adumbrate the argument that the political commitments of both past and present observers of Central African social realities might have led them to downplay unduly the significance of individualism among the subjects of their work. In the concluding section of my short discussion, I will use my reading of the mainsprings of Bantu Botatwe political behaviour to contribute to another arena of controversy touched upon in Englund's essay: the imbrications of politics and religion in contemporary Africa.

Speaking in the Zambian National Assembly in 1968, Edward Mungoni Liso, Nkumbula's alter ego and the most faithful interpreter of his thought at the time, questioned the foundations of Republican President Kaunda's 'Humanism' by stressing that in the Southern Province, "'the part of Zambia that I come from'", "'achievement... was far more respected than anything else even than the man... [I]n our society we did not regard everybody as equal. Even up to the present moment, Sir, at home a poor man is looked down [on] in pure village life'" (quoted in Macola 2010: 118). Three years earlier, Maxwell Beyani, another member of Nkumbula's opposition party, the ANC, had described his Tonga constituents as "'hard workers [who] want to spend most of their time improving their way of life... [T]hey hate interference which does not lead to prosperity'" (quoted in Macola 2010: 117).

Views of this nature suggest that, beginning in the middle decades of the twentieth century, a deep, centuries-long history of 'statelessness' (Colson 1962; De Luna 2012; but cf. O'Brien 1983) or political fragmentation (Fielder 1965: 30–41) and a much more recent history of comparatively successful involvement in market production (Vickery 1986) were leading to the emergence of norms of social behaviour that it is difficult not to qualify as 'individualist'. Built around the celebration of self-reliance, autonomy and personal enterprise, this world view was shared by both 'rich' and 'poor' Tonga-speaking peasants (who – as Momba

(1989: 331–2, 346) clarified – were not separated by differential access to the means of production and cannot therefore be rightly described as forming separate, antagonistic classes). This – I am persuaded – lay at the very heart of the political philosophy of Nkumbula and his party in the aftermath of the emergence of UNIP. If liberal thought – as Englund argued in his review article and elsewhere (2006; 2011) – has always oscillated between the poles of rights and freedom on the one hand and duties and equality on the other, by the time their alliance with the ANC crystallized, Bantu Botatwe opinion makers (often the better-off peasants) were strongly leaning towards the former bundle of concepts. Their impermeability to offers of state patronage, I argue, is to be understood in this light. While the adjective ‘neoliberal’ is plainly inappropriate to describe this set of aspirations and concerns, one ought not to shy away from pointing to the possibility of their serving to energize such free-market, non-redistributive political projects as were espoused by Nkumbula. Influences from below, not least from smallholding farmers, work across the political spectrum and do not necessarily take the form that engaged social scientists might view as being desirable. This, after all, is the reason why orthodox Marxists have often regarded the ‘petty bourgeoisie’ with ‘contempt’ (Scott 2012: 86–7, 94–5). If an anachronistic definitional game is to be played, I would rather describe the Bantu Botatwe of the Southern Province as ‘right-leaning anarchists’ instead of ‘neoliberal’. ‘Right-leaning’ because the defence of private property and individual initiative were the organizing principles of their ‘cultural citizenship’, a neat expression I borrow from Scott (2012: 90); ‘anarchists’ because the claims of the state – be it colonial, postcolonial or, indeed, precolonial – were their ultimate *bête noire*. Pace Scott, however, these cultural inclinations do not appear to have been accompanied by a similarly profound attachment to ideas of ‘mutuality’.

My reading of Bantu Botatwe motives and commitment to the protection of their autonomy vis-à-vis the state is entirely secular. This, of course, is not to deny the sincerity of both their old and new religious allegiances from the early twentieth century (see, for example, Carmody 1992; Colson 2006), but it is to argue that such allegiances scarcely impinged on their oppositional political positioning in nationalist and contemporary Zambia. Instead of attempting to parry the charge of reductionism, I will end by pointing to a slightly disconcerting parallel between the nationalist historiography that revisionists have attempted to take to task and the more recent, and self-consciously cutting-edge, scholarship of which Gordon’s work (2012) represents such a distinguished example. The function attributed to religion in early, nationalist-inflected studies of African resistance during the Scramble was obvious enough: it was the world of the spirits and their mediums that provided that principle of inter-ethnic unity that was required if ‘primary’ resisters were to be legitimately portrayed as the precursors of later decolonization movements (Ranger 1968; Cobbing 1977; Beach 1979; Ellis 2000). Now that this epistemological responsibility has been lifted from the shoulders of the spirits, only their ostensible timelessness – and related exoticizing effects – remain. Yet there simply is no need to invoke supernatural forces to explain what, to the southerners who suffered for them, were, at heart, political choices rooted in civic concerns that were themselves interwoven with historical forces and economic circumstances. The Tonga-speaking peasants who followed Nkumbula through thick and thin paid a price in forgone patronage for their

principled stance; their province still bears the hallmarks of its long history of opposition to the dominant political dispensation. Viewing them as only partly responsible for their own destiny diminishes the morality of their choices. We have Englund to thank for taking the debate on religion and politics to another level in the new historiography of Zambia.

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Harri Englund has done us a great service in composing this challenging review essay. Having been away from matters Zambian for some years now, I must confess that I have not read all of the texts that he discusses here. For those with which I am familiar, though, it strikes me that Englund's account is right on the money, both in its generous recognition of contributions and innovations and in its sharp-eyed identification of errors and limitations. But his essay is no ordinary book review, and here I would like to concentrate not on the details of Englund's treatments of specific texts, but on the larger questions that he poses regarding the challenge of studying Zambian liberalism, and the specific research agenda that is, it seems to me, implicit in his comments.

As Englund notes, the texts reviewed comprise a kind of revisionist moment. After decades of scholarship structured by the binaries of settler colonialism and the Cold War, a new generation of historical work has revealed how much was lost or ignored in the old, well-rehearsed narratives of colonial oppression versus nationalist resistance. In a conceptual shift that (as Englund notes) took its time getting to Zambia, authoritarian nationalism has received new critical scrutiny, while new sites and sources of popular agency have been identified and celebrated. But this move is not enough. The next step, which will be much harder, is (in Englund's terms) 'to move revisionism from the celebration of agency and resistance to harder questions about the place that the liberal values of equality and freedom might have both among the instances being studied and in scholars' own commitments'.

As for how to accomplish such a move, Englund makes one principal suggestion. I will make another. Englund's suggestion calls for a new level of attention to empirical specificity, and to the study of ideas that we might term 'liberal' as they actually occur, embedded in specific social processes and social sites. Too often, he warns, liberalism is taken as a known entity, and things such as 'grass roots popular opposition', 'civil society' and 'social movements' invoked rather too easily, with little sense of who the specific and various actors are, and how, in fact, they think and talk. We must be wary, he warns, of false cognates and 'spurious analogies' – Zambian liberalism may be constituted in ways that are very different from the 'Western' ideal types with which it is sometimes too quickly assimilated. And this is not just a warning about the limits of past research; it has immediate implications for how we should conduct our research, both historical and ethnographic, in the future. Specifically, it implies that we must pay more attention both to the social contexts within which thought and language emerge (picking quotes out of the newspaper won't do) and to local languages (since liberalism doesn't always come speaking English).

With all of this I agree completely. I would add only that the Zambian literature has so far had little to say about a cluster of issues that are central to discussions of liberal democracy in much of the rest of the world: the question of the economic and social (and not just the political) dimensions of liberal democratic citizenship. This question has typically been taken up in the context of debates about the welfare state, social democracy, and claims of economic and social rights. And while the discussion, in these terms, may not seem a familiar one to Zambianists, the question of how democracy can, or should, transform the socio-economic, as well as the political, lives of citizens is hardly alien to Zambian history. Indeed, Zambians today are acutely aware that if authoritarian nationalism and African socialism failed to deliver the 'liberation' goods, so has multiparty electoral democracy. In this sense, the question of what a 'real liberation' would look like remains alive, and unanswered.

A wider regional history has already shown some of the surprising directions that the search for economic transformation via political liberty may take. In South Africa, to take the best-known case, a process of political democratization has combined with neoliberal economic restructuring to yield a result that few expected, namely a novel sort of welfare state that today delivers to its citizens not only services such as subsidized housing and electricity but also direct cash grants now paid to more than 30 per cent of the entire population. Similar programmes of cash grants now exist in Zambia's nearer neighbours, Botswana and Namibia, and a number of pilot cash transfer schemes have been launched in Zambia itself in recent years. Given the preoccupations of my own recent research, I cannot help but wonder if these new additions to the package of goods that liberal democracy is expected to bestow on its citizens may not yield important new innovations in the regional meaning of such 'liberal' things as freedom, equality and the rule of 'the people'. Certainly, the long history of Zambian engagements with ideas of liberalism and democracy is not over, and the struggle to attach substantive economic and social content to liberal ideals seems sure to remain a vital one in the years to come.

Englund's thoughtful meditation combines a fine sense of appreciation for the profound accomplishments of existing scholarship (by this generation of scholars and those that have gone before) with a restless insistence that the real work lies ahead of us. In this admirable spirit, which we might term the opposite of self-satisfaction, one could conclude that it is for all of us, and not only for the authors reviewed here, 'to rise to the challenge of [our] own findings'.

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